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Reimagining the Umma:
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3. Migration, Spatial Change and the Globalisation of Cultures
4. International Politics and Culture

**Reimagining the Umma:
Transnational Spaces and the Changing Boundaries
of Muslim Political Community**

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Introduction

There has been a renewed interest in culture and identity in International Relations (IR) over the past few years. Much of it, I want to argue though, has been for all the wrong reasons. Many recent treatments of these subjects have been largely 'reactionary' in nature, seeking to understand, for example, why the end of the Cold War seems to have given rise to so many 'ethnic', 'nationalist', and identity-based conflicts. Analysts of post-Cold War world politics (and certainly those working within a neo-realist framework) seem to notice that people are talking about culture and identity with greater frequency and therefore decide that they had better go off and learn something about these things. The problem here is that there appears to be an assumption that if we simply understand what culture 'is' then we will be able to understand how people behave. That is, culture tends to be treated as an ontological given, as something 'out there' that can be apprehended, studied and then deployed as an explanatory variable. It is my contention, however, that we need to understand the current sociocultural transformations of world politics as *constitutive of new political identities*, rather than simply searching for explanations that will help us to comprehend political phenomena according to conventional, outdated modes of thought. We need to think identity beyond ethnicity, nationalism and culture. Indeed, we need to write very strongly *against* such essentialising categories. So rather than speaking of the renewed importance of ethnicity and nationalism, I seek in this paper to highlight the ways in which transnational and globalising processes are actually modifying some of our most fundamental conceptions of the ethnic and the national. I attempt to develop a vision of 'translocal politics', focusing less on the examination of bordered, bounded and fixed identities and concentrating instead on the ways in which international socio-political life manages increasingly to escape the constraints of the territorial nation-state. This involves the reconceptualisation of IR such that 'the political' is not understood as a practice or set of practices which pertains only to relations between given (that is, prior and self-evident) actors within specific territorial units, but rather as a space of interaction situated across and, more particularly, *between* multiple territories – interaction which, again, is itself constitutive of new political identities. This paper complements post-positivist and post-structural accounts of 'fragmented', 'multiple', and 'constructed' identities by exploring how these multiple fragments are implicated in the contemporary practice of (re)constructing migrant identities, diasporic/exilic lives and 'travelling' subjectivities – focusing mainly on developments in the Muslim world. This form of post-statist analysis can, I hope, contribute to our ongoing efforts to delineate a nascent post-national geography for International Relations.

A changing geography

The sociocultural transformations associated with globalising processes are to day forcing us to rethink conventional categories of politics and community. There is a sense in which we are dealing here not with a new and unique set of changes, but rather the inability of dominant forms of political and international theory to deal with change as a form of continuity. The fixed categories of political theory have reproduced the state as the only legitimate site of 'the political' and, consequently, other locations of political discourse have stayed off our political maps. The globalising transformations of recent years have occurred with unprecedented velocity and invasiveness. Changes in modes of social (and hence political) organisation have been more rapid and deep-reaching in the present era than ever before. While these process have existed for several centuries, various sociocultural and technological transformations during the last century – some of which I review below – have sharply boosted its intensity. The sorts of transformations to which I am referring are often analysed under the rubric of 'globalisation', but this term has acquired so much ideological and sensationalist baggage in recent years as to become almost analytically meaningless. Some of the dynamics I have in mind are often much less than global in scope; indeed, many of them are better understood as particularly 'local' phenomenon albeit ones which sometimes operate across vast distances – hence my emphasis below on the notion of *translocality*. So while I may at times draw on globalisation theory, I am not convinced that what I am saying necessarily pertains to 'the globe' as a single space. Rather, I am seeking in this paper to understand how we interact between and across social spaces (often separated by great distances), and how this interaction mediates the construction of political identities. Let me first briefly review some of the developments which I take to be the driving force behind the current period of sociocultural transformation.

First, there has been a phenomenal growth in the movement of peoples: from labour diasporas, guest workers and economic migrants to political exiles and the refugees of humanitarian disasters. Lives (and lifestyles) are increasingly mobile for a variety of reasons. In the latter cases (refugees, exiles, etc.) movement is often a life and death imperative, while in the former situations (e.g. economic transmigrants) movement is usually the result of global labour divisions and transnational capital flows. One analyst, for example, speaks of 'forms of international migration that emphasise contractual relationships, intermittent postings abroad, and *sojourning*, as opposed to permanent settlement and the exclusive adoption of the citizenship of a destination country'.¹

¹ Robin Cohen, 'Diasporas, the Nation-State, and Globalisation' in Wang Gungwu (ed.), *Global History and Migrations*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997, p. 135. Emphasis added.

Second, we have seen the emergence of **transnational social movements** which occupy a particular political *space* (gender, human rights, religious and/or ethnic identity) but not necessarily a specific *place*. By this I mean that many of these movements operate across borders and without exclusive reference to a specific state, nation or region. Moreover, they often engage in activities which are explicitly critical of state regimes and/or traditional aspects of state sovereignty. Human Rights Watch, for example, monitors and reports on the use of violence *within* states (torture, extrajudicial execution, etc.), and a group such as Médecins sans Frontières questions the inviolability of state borders in times of humanitarian emergency (e.g. environmental disasters, the suffering of civilians during wartime).

It should be noted that we tend to understand the term 'transnational social movement' as referring primarily to Western 'progressive' agendas (e.g. gender, the environment, human rights) – indeed, this is the sense in which the term is used in much of the literature devoted to social movements, especially those studies dealing with so-called 'new social movements'. However, we also need to recognise the existence of many other such transnational interest groups – ones whose concerns are easily overlooked because they do not fall into the range of activities we usually associate with the political. Thousands of organisations, of all shapes and sizes, operate across and between bordered spaces.

Third, experiments with **supranational politic forms** – such as the European Union – provide an institutionalised forum for thinking beyond the nation-state. One analyst sees the EU as the first 'multiperspectival polity' to emerge in the modern era. For him, 'it is increasingly difficult to visualize the conduct of international politics among community members, and to a considerable measure even domestic politics, as though it took place from a starting point of [fifteen] separate, single, fixed viewpoints'.² In this sense, the identity of each member state is in part constituted by the other fourteen. Modes of organisation and interaction increasingly require Europeans to look beyond the particularity of their national identities in order to prosper. In its present form the EU is still very much an intergovernmental (i.e. inter-state) organisation. Even if the logic of integration were followed through to its most extreme form, complete the dissolution of all national boundaries, it is very likely that a European federation (which itself still implies the existence of constituent members) would institutionally be nothing more than the state writ large. However, what would be interesting and relevant here would be the social (and necessarily political) processes by which people come to see themselves as part of or in relation to a European identity – e.g. education, polylinguality, trans-European residence, etc.

² John Gerard Ruggie, 'Territoriality and beyond: problematizing modernity in international relations', *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 1, Winter 1993, p. 172

Fourth, the rise of **global cities** has meant the emergence of spaces that are particularly rich in transnational significance. The cities in question (London, Hong Kong, Singapore, New York) are often lynchpins in the global world economy and hence their inhabitants are often implicated in the transnational labour processes alluded to above. Analysts of global cities have identified the existence of new 'transterritorial economies' and innovations in the spatial expression of capital mobility.³ The polyglot metropolises also bear witness to extraordinary processes of identity (re)formation and sociocultural melange – as well as providing an abundance of material for the morphology of cultural dynamics. In many ways the global city is today the very best example of what is referred to by the notion of 'translocal space'.

Finally, phenomenal developments in the **technologies of travel and communication** have played a crucial role in enabling all of these transformations. By allowing people to move across distances and to communicate with each other far more easily, they have effectively led to the compression of space and time. Furthermore, our very notions of distance and chronology have been relativised such that we begin to perceive our relationships within space and time differently. Commercial air travel and various media technologies (telephone, fax, satellite television, e-mail, etc.) are perhaps the most relevant here, facilitating on the one hand very rapid transport and on the other near instantaneous communications. Furthermore, information (and hence its transnational distribution) has become a valuable commodity in and of itself.

Gaps, borderzones and translocalities

These five transformative forces are contributing towards the emergence of 'gaps' in the global architecture, a 'liminal space that cuts across inside/outside, a space that is neither within the state nor an aspect of the international state system but animates both'.⁴ Many writers from a variety of disciplinary projects are writing about these gaps using an equally diverse range of terminologies and theoretical rubrics. James Rosenau has his 'Frontier';⁵ Michael Kearney and Renato Rosaldo write about ethnographies in the 'borderzones';⁶ Homi Bhabha

³ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

⁴ Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, 'Introduction: Religion, States, and Transnational Civil Society' in Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori (eds.), *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997, p. 1

⁵ James Rosenau, *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁶ Michael Kearney, 'Borders and Boundaries of State and Self at the End of Empire', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1991; and Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, London: Routledge, 1993.

locates hybrid identities in the interstices of a 'third space'⁷ – and we find him echoed in Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg's proposition of a 'third time-space'. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph analyses non-state identities as a form of 'transnational civil society'⁸ and Arjun Appadurai looks to 'translocalities' to find the contours of a post-national geography.⁹ Each of these tropes is of course a world unto itself, and it would do them (and their authors) great discursive violence to simply conflate them. There is however a sense in which all of these theorists are writing about very similar phenomena, but with the obvious caveat that each does so within his or her own normative and (usually) disciplinary context.

In all of this thinking there is an implicit (and often explicit) concern with the 'anti-national' which allows us to bring in Arjun Appadurai's conception of *translocality* as a space in which the hegemony of nationalist politics is challenged by forms of life which refuse to recognise the limits of the state as the limits of its politics. The *translocal* is the space that bridges *place*, a 'dwelling-in-travelling'. In one sense we are speaking of an empowering distanciation, the ability to defy by not staying put, by not allowing the state to render one 'static'. At the same time, however, translocality is also dislocation and displacement. It is about being neither here nor there, neither one nor the other. 'Living in the border', write Lavie and Swedenburg, 'is frequently to experience the feeling of being trapped in an impossible in-between...' ¹⁰ To inhabit the borderzone is to threaten the hegemony of an International Relations with a very limited capacity to 'see' other forms of politics outside its statist framework.

Unsurprisingly, then, International Theory has not been very effective in accounting for these sociocultural transformations and their concomitant translocal politics. There are, of course, some notable exceptions. Certain trends in contemporary IR theory have recently begun to put the relationship between politics and political space under intense scrutiny. This critical literature has been the result of two inter-related phenomena. The first factor motivating this critical project is an increased awareness of the questions posed by the transformations I have identified above, political forces which are trans-, anti- or post-national in nature. How should we account for forms of politics which increasingly transcend (or which never ever really fit into) the limits of the nation-state in the sense of a bounded, fixed space? Or, to put it another way, how can we escape 'a politics of little boxes' ?¹¹ The second is a growing appreciation of the fact that many of our seemingly natural and unproblematised categories

⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994

⁸ Rudolph, *op. cit.*

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

¹⁰ Lavie and Swedenburg, p. 15

¹¹ R.B.J. Walker, 'International Relations and the Concept of the Political', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, p. 324

of political thought have been constituted as such only through various processes of discursive hegemony, processes which are themselves deeply political in nature. By abandoning what it regards as the ahistorical essentialism of traditional political analysis, the critical turn in international theory seeks to investigate the socio-political and historical contexts which have produced (and reproduced) particular forms of knowledge as 'political theory'. We can gain some insight into this thinking via the work of one writer within this critical trend, Warren Magnusson.

Magnusson's work has also focused on the problem of modernity and where it locates legitimate political activity. By looking at what goes on in the 'gaps' between societies and states, Magnusson seeks to identify forms of 'global popular politics':

My claim is that popular politics occurs at the juncture of localities and movements, and that state-centric theories conceal the character of politics by reifying localities and movements as dimensions of the state or of prepolitical civil society...Mine is a worm's-eye view, which focuses on realities at the margin between 'the state' and 'civil society', or between formalized politics and social actions. At first sight, these realities seem far removed from international relations, but in fact they are the presence of popular politics in the global domain.¹²

On Magnusson's reading, the majority of contemporary political science *and* sociology still sees society as an entity defined in relation to the state, and politics as a process of government which links civil society to the state – and certainly only *within* the state. In this regard, both disciplines tend to ignore political processes which do not fit into a cybernetic dynamic of state-civil society relations.¹³ Like Walker, Magnusson's dissatisfaction with conventional idioms of the political also leads him to consider the role of social movements. He makes the important point that social movements tend to be considered political only when they become institutionalised – that is, when pinned down and made to wear the garb of proper politics. 'This suggests that the collective activities of ordinary people, in working out new understandings of themselves and bringing those understandings into the world, are themselves *prepolitical*. Thus, the creative social activity in which ordinary people are most likely to be engaged appears *beyond or outside politics*'.¹⁴ He goes on to argue that this distorted view of social movements arises from a political imagination constrained by state-centric conceptions of what it means to act politically. 'If we begin with popular political

¹² Warren Magnusson, 'The Reification of Political Community', in R.B.J. Walker and Saul H. Mendlovitz (eds.), *Contending Sovereignties: Redefining Political Community*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1990, p. 45

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52. Emphasis added.

activity', he argues, 'rather than from the enclosure imposed upon it, another dimension of reality emerges'.¹⁵ Magnusson sees social movements as the cutting edge of a creative politics embedded in the minutiae of daily life, and emphasises the important role of localities in providing a socio-cultural context for the elaboration of popular politics:

Localities are the venues for such politics. They are the places where the various practices of domination meet with the practices of political resistance and invention. Politics as a creative popular activity thus occurs at the junctures of localities and movements. These junctures are obscured by the reification of political community as the state and political theory as the theory of the state. To focus on these junctures is to open two analytic dimensions: first, *locality* as the place where movements arise and where they meet; and, second, *movement* as a mode of action that redefines political community, and hence connects localities to one another. In exploring these dimensions, we become acutely conscious of the fact that the state never fully contains the everyday experience of politics or political community.¹⁶

It is these junctures – the interstices of localities and movements – that I call *translocalities*. My claim, in short, is that these junctures are replete with international relations but not of a sort which International Relations would recognise. Because the state never fully contains the everyday experience of politics or political community, conventional IR theory fails to account for a great deal of political activity. As the relationship between political identity and those categories closely associated with the state (e.g. citizenship and nationality) becomes increasingly tenuous, the conceptual language with which we read and write political identity requires rethinking.

Having recognised the value of the critical turn in IR and taking much of its insight as a departure point, I want to now go on to suggest that more thorough work in the theorisation of transnational political identity is being done elsewhere. Sociology and anthropology have in recent years provided important new ways of thinking about political identity in the wake of globalised structures and processes. Furthermore, it is in these fields that we find the most cogent analyses of transnational identities, new idioms of citizenship and 'travelling cultures' – life in the gaps. Where critical IR has mostly identified key problematiques, sociology and anthropology have offered wide-ranging theoretical and empirical investigations. My aim in the following section is to survey developments in these fields and, via an exploration of the work of several key figures, to demonstrate that sociology and anthropology have extremely important things to say about (and to) International Relations – particularly given the present climate of global sociocultural transformation.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55

The anthropology of relating internationally

What we may ask, have students of peoples (the anthropologists) and students of states (the scholars of IR) had to say to each other? Surprisingly little actually. Instances of interaction between anthropology and international relations have been far and few between. This can be explained to a large extent by the ways in which these disciplines have been represented. International relations is supposedly concerned with the lofty heights and intrigues of intergovernmental forums, that is with various forms of 'important' 'high' politics. Anthropology, on the other hand, functions to provide us with 'academic' accounts of strange and exotic peoples living in far-away villages – places which are somehow *without politics*, where instead we find only kin-groups, rites of passage, and violent rituals. There is, however, actually a great deal of discursive overlap between anthropology and international relations in that they are both fields whose more traditional variants specialise in the construction of 'Others' – exotic cultures in one case, and enemies of the nation-state in the other.

Among the official academic disciplines anthropology is unusual in the degree to which it has been assigned responsibility for articulating differentiation, and thus engaging in the intellectual/symbolic reproduction of differentiation, on a global scale, with respect to 'less developed peoples' as compared with 'us'.¹⁷

This statement also functions as a remarkably accurate description of what goes on in much of International Relations. There is a striking resemblance between the anthropological categories of 'the home' and 'the field' and IR's construction of 'the domestic' and 'the foreign'. Fieldwork (or the 'diplomatic mission') allows 'us' to venture forth and gain information about 'them'. Recent self-reflexive trends in anthropology have, however, begun to problematise the whole notion of 'the field'. As James Clifford notes:

There is no longer any place overview (mountaintop) from which to map human ways of life...Mountains are in constant motion. So are islands: for one cannot occupy, unambiguously, a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyze other cultures. Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another. Cultural analysis is always enmeshed in global movements of difference and power. How [then]...can ethnography—at home or abroad—define its object of study in ways that permit detailed, local, contextual analysis and simultaneously the portrayal of global implicating forces?¹⁸

¹⁷ Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 64

¹⁸ James Clifford, 'Introduction: Partial Truths', in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 22

Likewise, we need to ask how IR can accomplish the same. I take this to be the central problem of the social sciences at the present time. How can we understand the ways in which particularities stretch and reshape themselves over distances? What happens to culture when it travels? I want to argue that a richer appreciation of these phenomena can be gained by adopting what we might call 'ontologies and epistemologies of unboundedness'.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that one cannot so easily map peoples and cultures today by reference to static, fixed localities. As people move, the meaning of locality can itself shift such that it comes to refer to more than just a geographic notion of 'here'. Identity and place increasingly travel together. Uprooted and diasporic cultures reconstitute homes away from home, and hence the imagination of new distanced communities means that 'the local' can spread itself across and between bounded spaces. As Olwig puts it, 'important frameworks of life and sources of identification should...be sought in the cultural sites which have emerged in the *interstices between local and global conditions of life*'.¹⁹ Her work on the people of the West Indian island of Nevis is a prime example of how anthropology becomes transnational. In order to gain a better picture of contemporary Nevisian life, Olwig found that she had to carry out her fieldwork in four separate 'fields': Nevis itself; New Haven, Connecticut, a key destination of early twentieth century Nevisian migration; Leeds, England, which received many Nevisians in the 1950s and 60s; and the US Virgin Islands. She alludes to the sense in which her presence in any one of these fields could only tell part of the story:

Even though the field work of necessity was grounded in specific locations, it took place within a non-local cultural space related to the network of ties which connected individual Nevisians residing in these separate locations. Thus a great deal of the Nevisians' daily life was oriented towards activities and concerns of relevance to people and places in other points in the global network, giving me the feeling that Nevisian culture kept escaping me -- *it always seemed to be where I was not*.²⁰

Transnational anthropology seems to better appreciate the fact that people are increasingly mobile and that their identities are now configured in relation to more than one locality – or towards localities which have been effectively 'stretched' across space. Peoples and cultures are not to be understood solely by reference to what is taken to be their 'place', but rather by

¹⁹ Karen Fog Olwig, 'Cultural sites: Sustaining a home in a deterritorialized world', in Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup (eds.), *Siting Culture: the shifting anthropological object*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 35. Emphasis added.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 19. Emphasis added.

the ways in which they define themselves between and across such places. The general orientation to which I refer might then be summarised as follows:

Anthropologists...[are] beginning to critique the idea that settled life in particular places necessarily is a 'normal' state of being. A great deal of attention is therefore now being directed at the cultural and social significance of moving in space and the transnational communities which may result from this.²¹

This 'people and place' dynamic becomes even more interesting when we begin to consider how it mediates political identity. How do these processes affect and/or change nations and states? If we take these two categories to be representative of traditional notions of the political then an emphasis on transnational relations allows us to move beyond the boundaries of conventional politics. This task has a vital normative component insofar as the peoples and cultures involved are often 'invisible' because they do not conform to the modern political imaginary.

Let me conclude this first section by recapping the key arguments I have made thus far. I began with a critique of state-centrism in IR and highlighted some of the key sociocultural transformations which question the hegemony of this structure. I suggested that we need to question today the extent to which the imagination of political identity remains nationalised – that is, whether political identity remains the exclusive reserve of a single national-territorial referent. The approach I would endorse involves re-orientating the trajectory and widening the arc of analysis in international relations such that its emphasis lies less on the examination of bordered, bounded and fixed entities and concentrates instead on the ways in which international socio-political life manages increasingly to escape the constraints of the territorial nation-state. This involves the reconceptualisation of international relations such that 'the political' is not understood as a practice or set of practices which pertains only to relations between given (that is, prior and self-evident) actors within specific territorial units, but rather as a space of interaction situated across and, more particularly, *between* multiple territories – interaction which is itself *constitutive of new political identities*. It is when the nexus of globalisation and political practice is viewed in this sense that the possibility of translocal politics begins to emerge.

In an increasingly globalised environment, the rigidity of bureaucratic and institutional structures such as the nation-state have allowed mounting pressures to produce a certain amount of cracking and fragmentation in their frameworks. The inherent fluidity of political identities, however, has allowed them to flow into, through, and out of these gaps – merging

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

and syncretising as they go – thus creating new forms of politics whose dynamics hinge on time-space distancing²² rather than on the persistence of a fixed territorial space. In this paper I have been concerned to map the conceptual ground upon which translocal identities are constructed under globalisation, and to frame some of the dynamics which underpin new forms of political practice. In doing so I have also sought to critique some of the ways in which international relations has been traditionally configured.

Travelling Islam

The second section of the paper goes on to consider the conceptual problems raised by the notions of translocality and travel in the case of Islam. Let me begin with two historical soundbites.

On three occasions between 1649 and 1661 the Moroccan traveler, scholar and (undoubtedly) theorist Abu Salim 'Abdullah al-'Ayyashi plied the deserts between North Africa and the Hijaz region of western Arabia. His routes led him through Islam's holiest cities and several of its most renowned places of learning. All his itineraries – citing extended stays in both Cairo and Jerusalem – and a full gamut of impressions from joy to disillusion were faithfully recorded in his two volume *Ma' al-Mawa'id*.²³ In it, Abu Salim never hesitates to mention (and critique) local variations of Islamic practice at the many junctures of his journey, or to omit accounts of his many debates with scholars of diverse Islamic religious-juridical traditions. From the somatics of prayer to contesting genealogies of religious authority, each new idiosyncrasy is digested and reflected upon. All the while, of course, Abu Salim's own 'strange' idiom of Islam was carefully entered into the catalogues of his various hosts. The observer becomes the observed, the curator is himself curated...

Or consider the young Ali Shariati, future ideologue of Iran's Islamic Revolution, as a student in the Paris of the early 1960s.²⁴ Repulsed by the urban hedonism of the French capital yet at the same time captured by the vigor of its intellectual life, Shariati's transformation during these years was considerable. In Paris his Islam becomes eclectic. The Shi'ism of his homeland loses its monopoly over his religious imagination; soon non-Shi'ite and even

²² For an elaboration of this concept see Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, p. 64

²³ A.S. al-'Ayyashi, *Ma' al-Mawa'id*, Fez: 1989-9, 2 Volumes. See also Abderrahmane El Moudden, 'The ambivalence of *rihla*: community integration and self-definition in Moroccan travel accounts: 1300-1800', in Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (eds.), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. My own account is largely derived from this latter source.

²⁴ My comments on Shariati rely heavily on Ali Rahnema, 'Ali Shariati: Teacher, Preacher, Rebel', in Ali Rahnema (ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, London: Zed Books, 1994.

Western interpretations of Islam begin to find their way into his thought and writing. Religion is now a sociopolitical imperative rather than a source of dogmatism: Shariati's journey becomes Islam's journey...

And so theory travels. That which 'is' in one place elsewhere becomes undone, translated, reinscribed; this is the nature of translocality: a cultural politics of *becoming*. But what does it mean for theory to travel? I want to argue that it is becoming increasingly difficult to think of peoples and their politics in terms of bounded localities since globalising and distancing processes construct hybrid identities which need to be mapped across multiple (trans)localities. These processes are an important aspect of international relations, but traditional IR theory with its state-centric worldview and limited conception of the political is unable to account for much of this translocal activity. I am not arguing, as it may seem, that we need to write more about culture in IR; if anything I am suggesting that we need to write *against* culture. Culture is not a given object 'out there', freely available for us to comprehend, study and then re-deploy as an explanatory variable. Just like theories, cultures are also always travelling. The anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has noted that culture often serves the discursive function of 'making other'. However, she warns of the dangers inherent in taking the particular situatedness of a few individuals as representative of an entire culture. Instead, Abu-Lughod suggests that we might more usefully write what she terms 'ethnographies of the particular'. By this she means that we need to pay close attention not only to peoples' situatedness in particular sociocultural contexts, but also to their situatedness *within* these contexts. What power relationships obtain in any given community, and where are individuals positioned vis à vis these structures? What individual meanings do subjectivities derive from the signifying practices of a culture?

The key point which arises from this – and one which will figure heavily in my later treatment of Muslim political community – is the fact that within any given culture or community we find various and often competing conceptions of what that identity is and what it means. The politics of identity is therefore not based only on the presence of an external other against which communities and cultures may define themselves, but also on the process of negotiation and debate taking place *within* a given community. In this regard we might want to speak about the presence of an 'internal other'. We should also note that it becomes all the more difficult here to speak of any such thing as a 'given' culture or community since culture is actually the product of a dialogue involving both internal and external others. Within what I have termed *translocal space* this dialogue is all the more complex. The sheer multiplicity of subject positions and its concomitant cultural politics ensure that the production and representation of identity in these spaces will be intricate. This is especially the case when we are dealing with a cultural form such as Islam whose global sociocultural jurisdiction is extremely wide. For example, in the archetype of

translocal space, the global city (such as London), Islam is forced to contend not only with a vast array of non-Islamic others but also with an enormous diversity of Muslim opinion as to the nature and meaning of Islam.

'Traveling Theory' is the title of an essay by Edward Said that first appeared in his 1984 collection *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Said takes as his point of departure the fact that like peoples and institutions, ideas and theories also *travel*: 'from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another'.²⁵ For him, cultural and intellectual life are dependent on this circulation of ideas. In this sense the movement of theory is often a precondition for intellectual creativity. Said's main concern is with the ways in which theories change when they become translocal. He is keenly aware that ideas have to negotiate borders in much the same way that people do: 'Such movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas'.²⁶

Travelling theory hence provides us with useful ways of thinking about the politics of translocal space. It does so mainly in two ways. First, traveling theory allows us to conceptualise distancing processes as a source of cultural politics in which meanings are transplanted and rearticulated from one context to another. Second, in so far as this transition implies a *pluralisation* of theory, we can see that the notion of traveling theory also helps to explain how competing interpretations of a given culture come to exist – and how they seek hegemony by gaining a monopoly of the discursive field. I began this paper by suggesting that it is vital in the context of translocality to see culture – or theory – as something which can alter as it moves from place to place. At this juncture it was only natural for the notion of traveling theory to intervene. What I have not yet offered, and plan to elaborate in the next section, is a more specific understanding of translocal/traveling cultures. How can we best comprehend their characteristics? More importantly, what are the qualities which mediate the production and articulation of meaning in these spaces? I propose to answer these questions through an exploration of the discourses of travelling Islam. First, though, some brief but necessary comments on what I might term the metatheoretical parameters of Islam.

On my understanding, to speak of a *muslim* (in Arabic, 'one who submits') is simply to speak of a subject-consciousness which considers itself to possess or practice a form of identity which derives from something called Islam, regardless of what form one's consciousness of the latter takes. I am seeking to avoid the essentialism which can so easily

²⁵ Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 226

²⁶ *Ibid.*

be engendered by speaking about a single (absolute) system called Islam. In the same way, the term *Islamic* is problematic in that it would appear to suggest that there exists a body of thought or discursive practice which can be identified as 'authentic' or 'real' Islam. My aim is to emphasise the multiple, cross-cutting interpretations which produce and reproduce various understandings of this religion across an equally diverse range of sociocultural contexts.

Some writers have tried to come to terms with the diversity of the Islamic world by speaking of 'Islams' in the plural.²⁷ Their motivation is usually to escape the essentialising practices of Orientalism which on the one hand seek to impute some essence or immutable quality to Islam and on the other to avoid confirming the discourses of those contemporary Islamist ideologues who wish to portray their interpretation of the religion as the one and only 'true' Islam. By positing the existence of a multitude of 'Islams', however, these writers risk reproducing the very essentialism they wish to combat. This approach also flies in the face of the fact that the vast majority of Muslims, despite a clear cognisance of their religion's diversity, see themselves as adhering very firmly to a single Islam.²⁸ To speak of 'Islams' is to be haunted by a sense of boundaries; it gives the impression that there is some point where one Islam leaves off and another picks up. I prefer to think of Islam as something far more fluid. Islam can hence be seen as a single discursive field – a 'lifeworld' perhaps – yet one whose borders are constantly changing. The singularity of Islam does not, therefore, have to be seen as inimical to the social construction of Islam. It offers to its believers a set of meanings, but as Veena Das argues, these meanings are 'not to be interpreted once, and correctly, but continually reinterpreted, for meanings assigned to the word of God by human efforts can only be approximations'.²⁹

Islam, by its very nature, travels well. It can be, and often is, elaborated in many different ways in an equally diverse range of settings.³⁰ What happens, though, when Islam moves

²⁷ See e.g. Abdul Hamid M. el-Zein, 'Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 6, 1977, pp. 227-54 and Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, London: Verso, 2nd Edition, 1996.

²⁸ Dale Eickelman, 'The Study of Islam in Local Contexts', *Contributions to Asian Studies*, Vol. 17, 1982, p. 1

²⁹ Veena Das, 'For a folk-theology and theological anthropology of Islam', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1984, p. 296

³⁰ Several anthropologists have undertaken studies of Islam in these 'local' contexts. See e.g. John R. Bowen, 'Salat in Indonesia: The Social Meanings of an Islamic Ritual', *Man*, Vol. 24, pp. 600-19; Michael Lambek, 'Certain Knowledge, Contestable Authority: Power and Practice on the Islamic Periphery', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 17, No. 1, February 1990, pp. 23-40; Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvath (eds.), *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997; and David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander (eds.), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists*, London: Hurst & Company, 1997. A useful overview can be found in Dale F. Eickelman, 'The Study of Islam in Local Contexts', *Contributions to Asian Studies*, Vol. 17, 1982.

beyond contexts in which Muslims are a majority? What tools does Islam possess to communicate and negotiate across cultures? Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues that there is a tension within Islam, 'a global project organized in local structures', that becomes particularly pronounced in diaspora.³¹ What we see is a far more complex condition, one in which Islamic meanings shift, change and transmute, where things *become something else*. Likewise Islam becomes represented in new forms and via new media. Television, the Internet and 'secular' literature now suddenly all become sources of Islamic knowledge. The Muslim subjectivity also often becomes more aware of its religion in minority situations. In the 'homeland' Islam was an intrinsic aspect of that context's lifeworld, one which was taken for granted. In diaspora, however, Islam becomes yet another stigma of foreignness, a sign of the other. This causes the Muslim to objectify her religion and to engage in a self-examination or critique of Islam and its meanings.³² Migration is hence a rupture, an important break which can lead to changes in the significance of Islam and of being Muslim.³³

As regards the changing significance of Islam in diaspora we again find a diversity of experience. On the one hand there is a sense in which the difficulties involved in practicing Islam in a predominantly non-Muslim (and usually secular) society means that the religion becomes a new source of merit. A reconciliation of the five daily prayers with the typical European working day and the effort required to seek out *halal* meat (slaughtered in accordance with Islamic regulation) provide a particular sense of satisfaction when achieved in a non-Muslim context. On the other hand, however, there are also ways in the diasporic condition offers religious opportunities which might not have been available in one's home society. For example, because migration often brings greater economic prosperity, diasporic Muslims are often able to undertake religious duties such as the *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) which were previously beyond their means.³⁴ Another example of how diaspora can provide Muslims with new freedoms relates to those 'sects' which are minorities – and often persecuted – even within predominantly Muslim settings. Some of these groups are even banned in their home countries, or subject to considerable pressure from state institutions. Alevi and Ahmadi Muslims, often branded as heretical in Turkey and Pakistan respectively, often find that their religion loses much of its negative connotation in diaspora.

³¹ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Travelling Islam: mosques without minarets' in Ayse Öncü and Petra Wayland (eds.), *Space, Culture and Power: New identities in globalizing cities*, London: Zed Books, 1997, p. 197

³² *Ibid.*

³³ T. Sunier, 'Islam and Ethnicity Among Turks' in W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld (eds.), *Islam in Dutch Society*, Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992, p. 145

³⁴ Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Introduction: Sacred Words, Sanctioned Practice, New Communities', in Barbara Daly Metcalf (ed.), *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 9

Critical Islam and changing boundaries

In this final section I want to work towards a closer weave of the two narrative strands running through the paper. On the one hand we have story about translocality, non-statist forms of community and the emergence of new 'distanced' political spaces. On the other, a story about transformation within 'travelling Islam' and the diasporic Muslims whose lives it shapes.

In a recent essay, Dale Eickelman alludes to a nascent 'Islamic Reformation'.³⁵ Eickelman himself would be the first to admit the difficulties involved in trying to draw any hard and fast comparisons with the Christian Reformation. As he points out, Islam does not possess a clerical hierarchy or 'centre' against which one can rebel. His essay is also not in any way an attempt to 'push the other back in time' by suggesting that Islam is only now experiencing the upheavals which Christianity went through four hundred years ago. Rather, by referring to contemporary changes in Islam as a 'Reformation', Eickelman is indicating a trend in much of the Muslim world towards a greater critical awareness of religion. Muslims are increasingly willing to take Islam into their own hands, relying on their own readings and interpretations of the classical sources or following 'reformist' intellectuals who question traditional dogmas and challenge the claims of the ulama to be privileged sources of religious knowledge. Much of this is related to massive rises in literacy rates and the increased presence of religious issues in the public sphere as a result of globalised communications and media technologies. The authority of the written Word is no longer the sole reserve of a select few, and the religious elite cannot compete with the myriad range of Muslim voices reading, debating and, effectively, reformulating Islam on the Internet, on satellite television and in a plethora of widely-distributed books and pamphlets. Thus, 'media Islam', a new breed of Muslim intellectual and popular religious discourse, I want to argue, are all contributing towards the emergence of what we might call a new 'Muslim public sphere'. Furthermore, I also want to suggest that translocality should be seen as that which both enables this reformist discourse and provides the spaces in which much of it is elaborated. In this final section, therefore, we will first examine several aspects of the latter influence, that of translocality on Islam, before going on to assess the ways in which the Muslim reimagining of political community can be seen to constitute a new form of translocal politics.

Translocality has contributed significantly to the development of a critical Islamic discourse. In addition to the 'structural' factors mentioned above (e.g. increased literacy and the role of information technology), the objectification of religion which occurs as Muslims move

³⁵ Dale F. Eickelman, 'Inside the Islamic Reformation', *Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter 1998, pp. 80-89.

through and dwell in translocal space (i.e. their capability to externalise and critique Islam) has opened up new avenues for rethinking and reformulating Islamic thought. Many authors have emphasised that diasporic Muslims live in the constant shadow of the West, and that their discourse is consequently over-determined by the struggle against Western hegemony. I want to suggest, however, that translocality actually enables Muslims to focus on a different type of hegemony – namely, power asymmetries *within* Islam. I mean by this that in the process of displacing Islam from a particular national context and reconstituting it as a 'travelled' object in diaspora, Muslims develop an increased capacity to recognise, account for, and debate the difference within their religion. The relativisation of Islam which naturally occurs through travel allows Muslims to see internal hegemony, and translocality provides them with the intellectual environment in which to develop counter-hegemonic discourses. Talal Asad has argued that '[t]o secure its unity—to make its own history—dominant power has worked best through differentiating and classifying practices'.³⁶ The 'dominant power' to which he refers is usually taken to be a colonial or neo-imperial form – or at least something emanating from the West. I want to argue, however, that in translocality we often find hybridising manoeuvres which also seek to disclose the dominant powers within Islam. How, though, can we conceptualise such a thing as 'dominant power' in relation to Islam? We do so by looking for totalising discourses which claim the authority to represent the 'real' Islam and which also seek to label and classify 'deviant' Muslims. In the same way that the West reproduces its exceptionalism by repudiating any ethical claims which do not derive from its own tradition of modernity, so Islamic hegemonies (e.g. the Sunni majority) label and differentiate those readings of Islam which diverge from its orthodoxy (e.g. Shi'ism). This internal 'othering' is not, however, limited to theological debates. We see it also in the diasporic political arena, where groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajirun in the UK portray themselves as the only movement pursuing a 'truly Islamic' political agenda, and in doing so are able to set the terms of the political debate. Competing tendencies are hence constantly forced to respond to Hizb ut-Tahrir's ethical claims, rather than advancing their own vision of political community.

One of the chief obstacles to critical thinking in Islam during recent years has been the fact that Islamist discourse is usually constructed around a set of claims represented as non- or even anti-Western in nature. To critique this discourse, therefore, would be to betray and weaken its anti-Western potential. Another component of the same discourse has been a drive to depict criticism itself as a Western, and hence anti-Islamic, practice. Unsurprisingly, therefore, one of the main strategies deployed by hegemonic Muslim political discourse (such as Hizb ut-Tahrir's) is to portray any Muslim advocating a critical approach towards Islam as a 'closet Westerner'. A zero-sum game is constructed in which Muslims are either

³⁶ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 17

'truly' Islamic (i.e. sympathetic to Hizb ut-Tahrir) or Western collaborators (i.e. critical of Hizb ut-Tahrir's political discourse). Muslim modernists who seek to combine Islamic political concepts with Western analytic methodologies are similarly condemned by fundamentalists and conservatives alike as 'Westernised'.³⁷ It seems the slightest hint of Western thought in a Muslim discourse immediately corrupts and invalidates any ideas which might emerge from it.

This obsession with the West, it can be argued, has created an impasse whose logic runs something like this: 'If a critique of Islam is enacted then we Muslims are falling right into the hands of the West because critique is a Western mode and hence will inevitably weaken Islam. If, on the other hand, we do *not* engage in a critical renewal of our religion then Muslims will never make any progress in the modern world'. To escape from this dilemma, two further moves are required. The first is to dismantle the assumption that critique is an exclusively 'Western' concept. This is accomplished by pointing out that because there is no historical necessity to Western hegemony then there is therefore also no legitimate Western totalisation of discursive modes.³⁸ This first move enables hybridity by permitting the intermingling of Islamic and Western modes within a single discursive space. Many Muslim thinkers in diaspora are happy to engage in this sort of hybridity today, seeing in it the power of Bhabha's postcolonial political hybrid – or, in other words, a method for undermining the coherence of Western hegemony.³⁹ I want to argue, however, that a far more radical methodology can emerge from this disjuncture, one that is particularly suited to the 'multiple rootedness' of translocal space: an Islamic critique of Islam. 'Critiquing Islam from within' is a notion that has gained particular currency in recent years among diasporic Muslim intellectuals in the West. The late Fazlur Rahman, for example, was a keen advocate of such a methodology.⁴⁰ For him, a Muslim critique of Islam does not mean questioning the authenticity of the Qur'an or Hadith. Rather, what needs to be unmasked are the dogmas developed over the centuries (e.g. the various madhhabs) which were not specifically authorised by the Prophet. For Rahman, Islam has been bloated by intransigent theologies which have little or nothing to do with the ethical core of Muhammad's message. These dogmas, he believes, are often treated as if they, like the Qur'an, are somehow the untouchable word of God. There is thus a need to distinguish between what Rahman terms 'normative Islam' (Muhammad's 'true' message) and 'historical Islam' (the codification of

³⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 141

³⁸ Bobby Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, London: Zed Books, 1997, p. 118

³⁹ Pnina Werbner, 'The Making of Muslim Dissent: hybridized discourses, lay preachers, and radical rhetoric among British Pakistanis', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1996, p. 116

⁴⁰ Rahman, *op. cit.*

these norms by various political hegemonies).⁴¹ Too often, he argues, modern Muslims display a tendency to conflate these two. The juridical opinions (*fatwas*) of Islamic scholars, regardless of their renown, are nothing more than historically-situated opinion and therefore open to debate and, more crucially, abrogation.

I want to argue that translocal spaces provide discursive environments conducive to such alternative articulations. As previously mentioned, Muslims encounter a diverse range of interpretations and schools of thought in diaspora. As dialogue is enabled between these different tendencies, the differences between them are often attenuated. This diminution of difference, I believe, results from particular conceptions of Islam becoming disembedded from the 'lifeworlds' that sustain them in countries of origin, and, via translocality, resettled into circumstances in which they are in a minority. This process of relativisation allows Muslims to partake in a discourse of particularity, one in which their conception of religion is no longer universal. Crucially, however, and unlike hegemonic discourse, this is also a space in which no particular conception of Islam is *negated*.

Difference is negotiated, rather than eradicated. As one observer puts it, 'You learn to adjust to other tendencies and be at ease with other interpretations of Islam without feeling that you are diluting your own beliefs'.⁴²

So what form is this critical thinking in Islam taking today? Not surprisingly, some of the most innovative ideas are coming from those thinkers who have either travelled abroad to study or who have had sustained contact with translocal critical theories. Rashid Ghannoushi, for example, the exiled leader of the Tunisian Islamist movement, has recently argued that *ikhtilaf* should be politically institutionalised. He means by this that a political community should possess the right to vote for or against the political implications of any given textual interpretation, and also to change its mind later if it so desires.⁴³ The implication here is that an opinion is not somehow inherently 'true' simply by virtue of having emanated from the *ulama*; rather, these opinions simply enter the 'public sphere' – that is to say, they become contestable and open to reinterpretation. Other Muslim scholars, from Egypt's Hassan Hanafi⁴⁴ to Harun Nasution in Indonesia, have attempted to reread the traditional theological

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141

⁴² Dr. Ataullah Siddiqui, Research Fellow, Islamic Foundation, personal interview, Leicester, 29 July, 1998.

⁴³ Talal Asad, 'Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions', *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review*, Vol.5, Issue 1: Contested Politics, 1996, p. 5

⁴⁴ Hassan Hanafi, *Min al-'aqida ila l-thawra*, Cairo: Maktaba Mabduhi, 5 Vols., n.d.

texts (*kalām*) so that they speak to the political imperatives of contemporary Islam.⁴⁵ There are also those, such as Fazlur Rahman, who have sought to critique some of Islam's orthodox political formulations. This is part of his broader project, outlined above, to remove interpretive agency from the hands of traditional scholars – and, more importantly for our context, from the state – and place it in the hands of Muslims. He argues, for example, that the slogan 'al-islam din wa dawla' (Islam is both religion and state) is often 'employed to dupe the common man into accepting that, instead of politics or the state serving the long-range objectives of Islam, Islam should come to serve the immediate and myopic objectives of party politics'.⁴⁶ The Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush has recently made similar arguments with regard to the situation in contemporary Iran. His message is particularly radical in that context because governance in Iran is, in theory, based on Imam Khomeini's principle of *wilayat al-faqih* ('governorship of the legal scholars'). This doctrine states that leadership of the Islamic community should be vested in the religious scholars because of their superior religious knowledge. Soroush, on the other hand, argues that no single interpretation of Islam is ever final and that therefore a religious state can never be ruled according to an 'official' political ideology. It is not surprising that such a position has made him a controversial figure in Iran. He has been forced by the pressures of conservative Islam to take up a more translocal existence, and currently spends considerable time lecturing abroad.

One of the most radical projects of Islamic critique can be found in the work of Mohammed Arkoun, an Algerian-Berber whose academic career has been spent almost entirely in Paris. Arkoun has sought to deploy post-structural methodology as a critical tool in his investigations of the history of ideas in Islam. His genealogies of Islamic reason and authority, for example, are highly original contributions to the growing discourse on critical Islam.⁴⁷

Arkoun reads the hegemony of the early Muslim dynasties, for example, as a delinking of political action and symbolic creativity:

Instead, there triumphed an inverse process whereby the symbolic capital carried by the Qur'an was utilized for the construction and imposition of an official, orthodox Islam: *official* because it resulted from political choices of the state, which physically eliminated opponents who stood for any other interpretations (the Shi'ite and

⁴⁵ See Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward with Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1997.

⁴⁶ Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 140

⁴⁷ See e.g. Mohammad Arkoun, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984; *Essais sur la pensée islamique*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 3rd edition, 1984; and 'The Concept of Authority in Islamic Thought' in Klaus Ferdinand and Mehdi Mozaffari (eds.), *Islam: State and Society*, London: Curzon Press, 1988.

Kharijite protesters, most notably); *orthodox* because the experts accredited by the political authorities gave credence to the idea that it is possible to read the Word of God correctly...⁴⁸

By revealing the historical situatedness of these supposedly 'correct', readings Arkoun is able to deconstruct layer upon layer of supposedly immutable theology. His is a theoretically sophisticated methodology which provides crucial support for the more general task of restating the nature and sources of Islamic authority – a task which, as we have seen, is most actively enjoined in the Muslim translocality. Many of the writers I have mentioned, such as Rahman, Hanafi and Arkoun, have at one time or another been 'travelling Muslims' and these translocal experiences have significantly influenced the development of their thinking by bringing them into contact with new peoples and bodies of theory, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

How though has the combination of these critical ideas and translocality been transforming popular Muslim political discourse? As we have seen in the first section, a number of writers have been emphasising the ways in which globalising processes increasingly disembody peoples and their political identities from the context of the nation-state. I want to argue that one of the most tangible manifestations of this phenomenon can be found in what I have termed translocal Islam. To some degree, as we have already seen, this is a product of the transformations occurring within Islam related to the sociology of knowledge and the question of who is 'authorised' to speak (and 'act') on behalf of Islam. Muslims are turning away from the traditional religious scholars of their 'local' communities and creating 'translocal' political spaces in which the authority of disparate Muslim voices is recognised. Often, as we have seen, the intellectuals to whom young Muslim turn for inspiration live in (and between) distant lands. We have noted, for example, the transnational relevance of thinkers such as Mawdudi and Khomeini. We can also recall travelling Indonesian students challenging village tradition by using ideas from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The national identity (or state affiliation) of these thinkers is not important. What matters is that they are able to articulate a Muslim (and thus 'authentic') normativity well-suited to the circumstances and problems of contemporary life. 'One of the most basic consequences of the new relationship between the religious community and society', argues Schiffauer, 'is that one no longer automatically belongs to a *given* community'.⁴⁹ The ability to publicly contest, debate and rearticulate ethical claims allows those who were formerly subjected to the hegemony of a particular ethical vision to now *politicise* their Muslim identities. A religious

⁴⁸ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, p. 22

⁴⁹ Werner Schiffauer, 'Migration and Religiousness' in Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman, *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, London: Mansell Publishing, 1988, p. 154. Emphasis added.

community becomes a political community, hence changing the boundaries which have traditionally constituted the latter in Islam.

Consequently, we have seen marked differences in the ways some Muslim movements organise themselves in diaspora. 'Lay' Muslims sometimes feel more inclined to become involved in Muslim associations in translocality because debates about political interpretations often take on a greater significance here.⁵⁰ We also see a tendency towards more open and dispersed forms of leadership, such as the phenomenon of elected imams in the United States.⁵¹ As we have noted above, the leaders or ideologues of a diasporic Muslim community might actually be based in settings far removed from those of their constituencies. The cases of the Sufi saint Zindapir (Pakistan) and the Naqshbandi Sheikh Nazim (Cyprus), both of whom possess sizeable numbers of adherents in the UK, illustrate this point well. It is not only the more conservative Sufi cults that have been affected by these translocal upheavals. The rise of the 'Islamist new intellectuals' is also linked to the transnational circulation of books, pamphlets and media technologies. Indeed, the new intellectuals' versatility with these technologies, when contrasted with the relative 'backwardness' of traditional sources of religious authority, goes a long way towards explaining their popularity – especially among the younger generation of Muslims. Even the icons of traditionalism have been forced at times to pay credence to the efficacy of the new intellectuals. For example, echoes of popular ideologues such as Ali Shariati can be heard in the speeches of Imam Khomeini.⁵² And the eminent faculty at al-Azhar has had to adjust to the fact that many young Muslims today are more willing to take their political theory from Rashid Ghannoushi than from a venerable '*alim*'.

The critical reform of Islam is an ongoing project. It is by no means the dominant tendency in contemporary Islam, but it is growing rapidly and its results can be seen to some degree in every corner of the Muslim world, whether it be an Indonesian university student questioning the authority of his village imam, a British Asian Muslim castigating the 'un-Islamic' practices of her parents, or Abdolkarim Soroush challenging the political legitimacy of the Iranian state. Critical Islam is also a gradual process. It is a slow (r)evolution, one working away quietly (but with occasional high-profile soundbites) at the grassroots of Muslim society. Obviously there is still considerable work to be done. As Talal Asad points out, Muslims still have a lot of thinking to do before they can claim to possess a distinctive vision of polity. All too often, claims about an Islamic political theory turn out to be little

⁵⁰ Hanns Thomä-Venske', 'The Religious Life of Muslims in Berlin' in Gerholm and Lithman, *op. cit.*, p. 80

⁵¹ Metcalf, *op. cit.*, p. 11

⁵² James Piscatori, 'The Rushdie Affair and the politics of ambiguity', *International Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 4, 1990, p. 775

more than anti-Western polemics, or else reaffirmations of the nation-state with a few 'Islamic' terms thrown in for good measure.⁵³ What *can* safely be said to be changing, however, are the boundaries of Muslim political community. In summary, then, I want to review the arguments I have made as to why translocality must be seen as a large part of these changes.

The first sense in which translocal space changes the boundaries of Muslim political community is related to the fact that in many of the cases we have dealt with community is constituted not in accordance with ethno-national identity, but rather in terms of one's identification with and, more crucially, rearticulation of a particular set of ethical claims (e.g. Islam as a 'good'). Muslims are disembedded from national contexts and resettled in interstitial spaces (i.e. 'in' a society but not 'of it') such that Islam becomes invested with a new political relevance. 'The religious' rather than 'the national' becomes the focus of political identity. A second change relates to how the boundaries of political community are transformed in translocal spaces when 'other' cultures and new structural contexts are encountered. A good example of this is the recasting of classical concepts such as *dar al-islam*, *dar al-harb*, and *dar al-ahd*, which was instigated by Islam's cognisance of its minority status in diaspora. Muslim notions of 'inside' and 'outside' have suddenly been inverted and traditional forms hegemony (e.g. those seeking to label some Muslims as deviants or heretics) are forced to redraw the contours of their identity to account for the Muslim 'other'. A third and closely related change concerns the widening of the parameters which determine who is permitted to speak on behalf of Islam. What was religious becomes 'political' as soon as Muslims begin to question the authority of those who have previously been recognised as legitimate sources of knowledge (e.g. the ulama). New intellectuals, university students and lay Muslims – men and women – can to some degree all be seen as sources of ijtihad and purveyors of authentic Islam. Their debates and critiques, I want to argue, constitute a dramatic widening of the *Muslim public sphere*. Furthermore, its emergence can be explained to a large extent as a consequence of translocality – in other words, the travelling theories, hybrid/diasporic identities and media technologies which Muslims are increasingly embracing. This public sphere also fulfils a crucial political function insofar as it offers a discursive space in which Muslims can articulate their normative claims (i.e. 'Islam') from a multiplicity of subject positions. As we have seen, though, this is not a space devoid of hegemony. There are still those forces seeking to monopolise the political agenda and to denounce any Muslims who deviate from their vision. The nature of this arena is such, however, that dissenting voices will always be heard. And as we have seen above, there are those who are doing much more than arguing for a greater

⁵³ One representative example of this genre is Kalim Siddiqui, 'Beyond the Muslim Nation-States' in Isma'il R. Al-Faruqi and Abdullah Omar Nasseef (eds.), *Social and Natural Sciences: The Islamic Perspective*, Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981.

toleration of different opinions. A number of Muslim thinkers have been undertaking ambitious critiques of their religion's traditional conceptual lexicon and producing innovative reformulations which help to construct an Islam for contemporary, translocal life.

Therefore, in seeking to answer the question of how Muslims today are reimagining the umma, we can identify two broad, and, in some senses, seemingly contradictory trends. I want to argue however that the apparent incompatibility of these tendencies is only an illusion because, in reality, they are both aspects of the same process. On the one hand, translocality and globalisation are providing Muslims with a greater capacity to communicate, interact, and otherwise bridge the distances between them. In this sense, translocality resonates with the Qur'anic injunction to Muslims of different nations to get to know one another (*Qur'an* 49:13). It promises that the umma could become a social reality. On the other hand, however, translocality also brings together Muslims of diverse sociocultural, sectarian and theological backgrounds. By forcing Islam to hold a mirror up to itself, it makes it aware of the many differences (and disunities) within. Although these two forces are seemingly contradictory – one a call to unity, the other a drive to differentiate – they are both constitutive of a single process leading Muslims towards greater 'globality' in the sense of a new consciousness of the world as a single space. The Muslim urge to 'relate internationally' thus becomes an impetus to negotiate difference, and to reformulate Islam in the face of globality. I am not in any way arguing that the first tendency, that towards 'unity', will triumph. When I speak of reimagining the umma, I am talking about more than Muslims simply stressing their similarities, de-emphasising their differences and living together in a single global community. Rather, I am speaking about Muslims *reconceptualising* the umma; that is, revising their ideas about who, what and where political community can be. Understood in this way – as possessing a critical edge – the idiom of 'reimagination' potentially has far more radical consequences.

Conclusion: a new politics of translocal space?

Rob Walker has noted that most attempts to explore the conjunction of social movements and world politics have tended to operate within the normative codes of conventional statist politics. He goes on to make the following suggestion:

An empirical exploration of this conjunction would more usefully begin by examining whether particular movements do or do not express these codes, in their explicit aspirations or their collective practices. It would ask about the articulations of identity and difference, self and other, space and time that constrain and inform their capacity to rearticulate their understanding of the political under contemporary

conditions. It would ask about the connections between such rearticulations in different structural locations.⁵⁴

My exploration of Muslim political community has been an attempt to do exactly this. I began by arguing that global sociocultural transformations are giving rise to new forms of transnational politics which conventional readings of the political – and especially the Realist tradition in International Relations – are incapable of accounting for. The nation-state model, I suggested, is under threat from a number of 'distanciating' processes which disembody peoples and cultures from particular territorial locales and spread their social relations across space and time. As a result, political identities no longer inhabit the exclusive container of the nation-state and must be seen as configured in and between multiple political spaces – a condition I termed *translocality*. I went on to argue that disciplinary projects outside International Relations – namely, postcolonial studies, cultural studies and critical anthropology – have developed far more sophisticated ways of thinking about 'the international' in the present context, emphasising as they do the fact that 'locality' is now an increasingly difficult concept to apprehend given the volume of movement, travel and communication between spaces and places. '[T]he spatial extension of households and ethnic communities across national borders', writes Michael Peter Smith, 'is producing new patterns of cultural and political appropriation and resistance by transnational migrants and refugees who in some ways partake of two nation-states but in other ways *move beyond them*'.⁵⁵ The declining efficacy of the nation-state means therefore that 'the national' no longer possesses a monopoly over descriptions of political identity. This fact has allowed non- or post-national formulations of political organisation to enter the picture. As a result of this, some writers have been led to speculate about new forms of post-national cosmopolitan identity,⁵⁶ while others have followed Walker's suggestion and undertaken studies of particular movements whose discourses imagine non-statist forms of political community. The present study can be seen as an example of the latter. I chose to focus on Islam because it represents a prominent non-statist, non-national identity discourse which today claims widespread – in fact, one would almost be justified in saying truly 'global' – validity as an ethical construct. Furthermore, there exist today significant translocal Muslim communities which have been constituted by a variety of migratory and postcolonial flows. My claim is that many of the movements which have arisen out of these communities can be seen as a form of what Smith has called 'transnational grassroots politics'.

⁵⁴ Rob Walker, 'Social Movements/World Politics', *Millennium*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1994, p. 700

⁵⁵ Michael Peter Smith, 'Can You Imagine? Transnational Migration and the Globalization of Grassroots Politics', *Social Text*, No. 39, Summer 1994, p. 15. Emphasis added.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (ed.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

As we have seen in this final section, translocality is also contributing to the emergence of new forms of 'critical Islam', by producing thinkers committed to the renewal and reform of religious dogma. Within translocality, these debates over authority in Islam constitute a new form of Muslim public sphere which, in turn, serves to widen the boundaries of Muslim political community. In a broad sense, then, we can conclude that the rethinking of political community is largely a result of Muslims living in translocal spaces which are themselves the product of wider migratory and globalising processes. The example of translocal Islam is therefore only one aspect of a much wider trend. Where Muslims are reimagining the umma, other identities have discrepant communal visions – their own forms of 'transnational grassroots politics'. The state and its 'International Relations' are still with us, however, and will be for some time to come. The state will never go out with a bang, and IR will never spontaneously combust. Our ambivalent inclinations towards their normative visions will, however, most likely intensify over time and, eventually, the borders will overflow. That's when they'll all come tumbling out: identities and ideas, separatists and strangers, modernities and Muslims...

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